

The Children Write a Play

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THE SETTLEMENT had for many years conducted a Children's Theater as part of its total dramatic program. Early one fall, a group of boys and girls ranging from eight to thirteen years of age gathered in an unusually large meeting room. Many of them expected that once again they would present formal plays "on the stage." The leader explained, "We are going to make up our own plays. If we make them interesting and enjoyable, we can invite an audience to watch them here in our meeting room. Everyone will have a chance to take part. We will not have to be concerned about getting our play ready on time. We can work as slowly as we want and present the show when it is worth seeing."

The children could not accept this method of work easily, for it was too "different." It took several sessions of talking this concept through, and beginning their "pretend" games, before their doubts and problems began to clear up. Gradually, enthusiasm for "something new" began to grow. The children who were to become the backbone of the group seemed to be eager from the beginning. They tended to come to the group meetings with an appreciable degree of regularity. The attendance of the other children varied considerably during the season, and group activities were adjusted by the leader in accordance with the number present at each meeting.

Learning to Play a Role

A Situation. Work was begun with "the pretend game." The boys and girls drew slips of paper on which were written situations, such as: "Pretend that you are a mother shopping with your little girl in a big department store. Your child gets lost. What do you do?" The youngsters in the group would consult with one another before presenting their improvisations.

Naturally, their ingenuity and imagination varied greatly. During the enactment of the scene, the leader and the non-participating children offered encouraging suggestions when the pauses proved too long. The "audience" was frequently irrepresible in its remarks; it was hard for them to wait until the actors were finished.

A Characterization. Sometimes, the "pretend game" called for emphasis on individual character-

ization rather than upon a situation. Such a problem might be: "Pretend that you are a little lame boy whose friends ask him out to play, but he is not sure whether he should go, so they don't wait for him. How do you think he would act and feel?" The leader would ask questions to help the child in formulating his thoughts, in creating a background for his characters, or in expressing the feelings of the character he was portraying. The questions might have been: "What is the lame boy's name? Where does he live? Does his mother want him to play or does she prefer that he remain at home? Do you think she 'babies' him too much? Does he like to play with the other little boys? Do they wait for him to catch up with them when they are playing together?" Often, the result of such a discussion would be a narration rather than a characterization. The child, once his imagination was freed, would give the group a long and detailed account of the lame boy without showing character directly. Then the leader would explain that the group wanted to see the boy himself. "Let him think out loud, and talk to his friends and himself. Let us hear him. Don't tell us, but show us."

A Pantomime. At other times, the group did simple things in pantomime like getting up in the morning, brushing one's teeth, washing, and eating. It was interesting that, in recalling these everyday habits, many little actions were overlooked when done entirely from sense memory. The audience would help the actor to develop his sense of observation by pointing out what had been forgotten.

Dressing-up. One day the leader brought a box of assorted costumes to the meeting room. The children rummaged through it, and, donning their selections, made up a scene or characterization inspired by the clothing.

The leader encouraged the children to draw on their own resources and experiences for their improvisations. The tendency toward movie plots of an adult nature was prevalent. Those who had been in the Children's Theater showed great enthusiasm for reenacting the plots of plays which had been produced in other seasons. Dramatizations of favorite stories were worked out, too, although the age level of the children's selections was rather low.

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Small Group Activity. At times, the leader would tell a story, and ask the group to dramatize it. These dramatizations were somewhat longer and some stage direction from the leader was necessary to regulate the confusing (albeit spirited) stage movement.

Sometimes the kindergarten children were invited to witness these performances, and their enthusiasm was most encouraging to the players.

Large Group Activity. One day when thirty children came to the meeting, a street scene was enacted. Folding chairs were used to make houses, with stores across the street. The children were divided into family groups. Some of the fathers owned the stores, others worked in them. Other familiar neighborhood figures were cast—the policeman, the landlord, the public health nurse. When the parts were set, all the children began talking at once. The leader worked this out by assigning numbers to each family group, and then they were able to take turns. This large group improvisation was very enjoyable to the children, and provided learning experiences in cooperation and planning as well.

Constructing a Play

On days when only a few children came to the meeting, the group would sit around a table and talk about "how a play is made." These sessions marked the beginnings of creative writing. The leader would ask what made a play move along. The children concluded in simple language that a play contained a number of steps which led *up* to a high point. There it stopped and the characters and the audience were not sure of what would happen next. Once the outcome was shown, the steps led *downward* to the end. These discussions led to consideration of the structure of familiar plays and stories. Thus a sense of building scene by scene was achieved.

By this time, a holiday was drawing near. The leader told an original story, related to the holiday, simply and briefly. The children added ideas of their own, and the completed story was broken down into scenes. The children improvised dialogue as they went along. Finding the right words was not always easy, and the leader helped with this in order to avoid repetitions. Gradually stage action was added. Many different children would play each scene, and comparisons were drawn by the group. In this way, all the children became familiar with each step of the play. The result of

The description of a method of program-building given here was prepared by Florence M. Rosenblum from a report by Esther M. Nighbert. It is reprinted from *Program Aids*, a quarterly publication of the National Jewish Welfare Board and is used in RECREATION by permission.

this was that when dialogue seemed to lag, some other character could pick it up. The play was presented as part of the Settlement's holiday party. Since the dialogue had never been written down, there was occasionally some forgetting, and it was not easy for the children to improvise under the tension of an actual performance. This was the group's first experience with putting the new method of work on the stage, and for this reason, it was an important learning experience.

The value of the approach showed itself again when the formal dramatic group was producing *Aladdin*. The children of the informal group were asked to be the mob scene. The children improvised the entire story, and later on, began to accent this particular scene. When the entire play was produced, the spontaneity of the mob's improvised dialogue was quite refreshing.

The Real Thing

When about fifteen children were rather steady in their attendance, the leader began work on the large project for which she had been preparing them. She brought to the meeting room several pamphlets from the National Child Labor Committee,* and told a composite story based on accounts of the actual experiences of migrant families. The description of these people's work, problems of living, of attending school, of traveling about in an old jalopy, caught the imagination of the listeners. As they began to act out the story, they asked questions of fact which the leader answered. She tried to help them see how the migrants' problems were similar to or differed from the children's own life situations. After several dramatizations the group began to narrow its activities to the story of one particular family. The story was broken into scenes, and the scenes into episodes, so that a definite movement in the play was outlined. All the children took turns playing the different roles. Sometimes, instead of dramatizing their story, the group talked about the problems they were depicting. Rehearsals soon began

* Pamphlets could be used around any subject in which the leader wanted to interest the children—the living conditions of Jewish children or adults in Europe or Palestine, for example.

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to follow a more formal procedure, in staging and movement. Dialogue was still improvised, but it very soon became necessary to "set" it. The children came for an extra session to do this job. The leader sat at the typewriter and the children dictated to her. Everyone remembered the dialogue as they went from scene to scene. The leader changed little of the wording, merely helping them to keep their phrases neat. When the script was finally complete, it was followed in ensuing rehearsals. This did not seem to make the procedure stereotyped; all the children knew all the lines, and their spirit of improvisation continued.

The last scene was the most difficult to formulate. The play up to this point moved along as a series of episodes depicting the life of the Jones family, in-migrant workers. Its message was implied rather than spoken. The last scene, however, had to reach a climax. The leader discussed with the children the meaning of the scenes they had already completed. "Now we know these things about the Joneses. . . . What do they mean to us, to those who will see the play? What do they mean to the Joneses?" The group decided that there had to be some future for people like the Jones family, and the opportunity to achieve the things they wished for. Finally, it was decided to have one of the Jones boys state simply the message of the play—the opportunity for education and growth for all.

The play was in rehearsal for almost four months of bi-weekly meetings. It was produced in the room where the children always meet. Props and

scenery were simple, and the actors wore old plain clothing. There was no curtain. A strip of brown paper painted with strawberries, (the Jones family was picking berries in the play) marked the division between stage and audience. The leader sat with the other spectators, and when the actors paused or faltered, she made a suggestion much as she would have had there been no "outsiders" present. The narrator introduced the play and the scene, and asked the audience to consider the social problem which the play presented.

In producing such a play, each child of necessity came to know a little more and feel a little more about social issues. But there seems to be a good deal more involved in this experience. The leader felt that many children began to come to the group who did not fit in elsewhere in the settlement. The shy ones and those with little talent for dramatic expression found the flexibility and informality of the program satisfying. All that children needed was the desire to participate. If skill were present, and could be developed, it was encouraged; if not, the child could still "go on playing." Those children who had little experience in any kind of dramatic activity seemed slow to respond. Their interest and need for dramatic expression was apparent and it was satisfying to the leader to draw them out slowly. It is not, of course, possible to measure the development and growth of each individual child during the experience. If their interest and enjoyment was any indication, then, certainly, a contribution must have been made.

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